

Highlights Tuesday from the Texas Capitol

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AUSTIN, Texas (AP) — Education and business leaders urged the Texas Legislature to move forward with new accountability standards.

They're responding to efforts to delay a new testing schedule until after the state has dealt with a multi-billion dollar budget shortfall that will likely mean layoffs for thousands of teachers. A new testing and accountability system, known as the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness, is set to go into effect next year.

"Texas has spent a lot of money and effort to prepare for the implementation of existing education reforms," said Sandy Kress, an education reform consultant. "Now it's time to move ahead. There is no excuse to delay."

The new system will replace the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills with a series of end-of-course exams. Delaying the implementation would undermine students' motivation, said Jim Windham, chairman of the Texas Institute for Education Reform.

"The mission doesn't change because we're having fiscal difficulties," Kress said.

IT'S A GAMBLE

Texas lawmakers considered 17 proposals that could expand gambling in the state, including measures to build billion-dollar casinos and install slot machines at racetracks.

The bills range from the modest addition of slot machines at existing dog and horse racing tracks to a 16-page constitutional amendment allowing development of eight Las Vegas-style destination casinos.

Dozens of people testified Tuesday before the House Licensing and Administrative Procedures Committee, with supporters saying that gaming taxes could put an additional \$1 billion a year into state coffers. Lawmakers are currently grappling with a \$27 billion budget shortfall in providing existing state services. Gambling proponents said this might be the best opportunity to expand gambling in Texas in a decade.

The Texas Gaming Association is backing House Joint Resolution 112, the omnibus constitutional amendment that would license eight casinos, allow slot machines at eight racetracks and allow more gaming on Indian lands. The association says its proposal could bring in \$1.2 billion a year in gaming taxes and promote luxury resorts because of the limited number of licenses.

But Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst, who controls the Texas Senate, threw a wet blanket on the proposals, saying senators were not interested in the bills.

"I haven't seen 21 senators say they want a gambling bill brought up," Dewhurst said. He added that he remains "personally opposed to expansion of gambling"

Developers, racetrack operators and breeders testified in favor of more gambling, insisting it would improve their businesses. But Christian and conservative groups were joined by some Indian tribes in opposing any expansion.

"I believe gambling tears down the family and promotes crime," said Pat Carlson, president of the conservative Eagle Forum. "The very people who should not gamble, do gamble.

TEXAS GRANTS:

When state lawmakers created the popular TEXAS Grant financial aid program, the goal was to help poor students get to college and create a future for tens of thousands who could not afford a higher education on their own.

A decade later, trends show that about half of those using the grant money don't graduate within six years. To improve those rates, two key lawmakers are now trying to put the most academically accomplished of those students at the front of the line for the money.

Bills by state Sen. Judith Zaffirini, D-Laredo and Rep Dan Branch, R-Dallas, who lead the Senate and House higher education committees would change that.

Their bills would first reward economically-qualifying high school students who have completed at least 12 hours of college-level courses or graduated under the Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate programs, or graduated with a

B average or higher in the top third of their class and passed a high-level mathematics class.

The changes would take effect with TEXAS Grants awarded in for the fall 2013 semester.

Both bills are moving closer to votes in the Senate and House.

That has minority groups — and the state senator who crafted TEXAS Grants — worried that black and Latino students will get pushed to the back at a time when lawmakers are already considering making deep cuts to the program. They say the state's poorest students could be left out.

DEATH PENALTY

The death sentence could be suspended in Texas while a proposed commission studies the use and effects of capital punishment in the state.

A state House committee heard testimony Tuesday on a bill that would create the Texas Capital Punishment Commission and establish a moratorium on executions until the commission completes its study. The nine-member commission would propose legislation to fix any inequities in state capital punishment procedures based on findings of the study.

This was just one of several bills the committee is considering to change the state death penalty and alter procedures in capital felony cases.

Rep. Harold Dutton, D-Houston, is working to amend state law to allow co-defendants to have separate trials in death penalty cases.

HOSPITALS OPPOSE CUTS

Members of the Texas Hospital Association lobbied the Legislature Tuesday to oppose the current House draft of the budget.

Hospital administrators complained that the House draft would force hospitals to lay off workers and charge patients with insurance more because the state is no longer caring for the poor.

"Low-income children and pregnant women don't stop needing health care just because the state didn't budget enough. If they can't find a doctor or a clinic, they come to the ER, where by state and federal law, our hospital must assess and stabilize them," said Bill Webster, chief executive officer of Medical Center Health System in Odessa.

The draft budget would cut \$8 billion from health and human services.

"Hospital services - and jobs - will be lost, and not just temporarily," said Dan Stultz, president and chief executive officer of the Texas Hospital Association. "These cuts won't heal."

DOCTOR DOCTOR:

Sen. Bob Deuell, who's a physician in his real life, was pressed into action when a spectator passed out in the Senate public gallery during a resolution honoring Americans who fought and died in Vietnam.

Turns out the patient was Jay Kimbrough, a Vietnam veteran and former top aide to Gov. Rick Perry. Kimbrough stayed down for several minutes and although security rushed a defibrillator over to Kimbrough in case it was needed, he was eventually able to walk out on his own.

Kimbrough, a former Marine, who was wounded in combat and has a tough-guy reputation, needed some prodding to go to the emergency room to get checked out.

"I told him, you want me to call the boss?" said Sen. Leticia Van de Putte. "He said, 'You're going to call Gov. Perry?' I said, 'No, I'm going to call your wife!'"

QUOTE OF THE DAY:

"We hope it will bring some jobs and capital to Texas, and more importantly, some money for the treasury." Texas Association of Business President Bill Hammond on a proposed constitutional amendment to allow gambling.

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